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# *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*

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## THE ELEMENTS OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

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destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

From a religious perspective, however, things look very different. Judaism and Christianity teach that the world was created by a loving, all-powerful God, to provide a home for us. We, in turn, were created in his image, with the intention that we would be *his children*. Thus the world is not devoid of meaning and purpose. It is, instead, the arena in which God's plans and purposes are realized. What could be more natural, then, than to think that "morality" is a part of the religious view of the world, whereas the atheist's view of the world—as delineated by Russell—has no place for values?

In discussing the connection (or lack of connection) between morality and religion, I will focus on one religion in particular, Christianity. There are, of course, other world religions that have been equally important. However, in our society most people embrace some form of Christianity, and when "religion and morals" are discussed, it is Christianity that people most often have in mind.

## 4.2. The Divine Command Theory

In both the Jewish and Christian traditions, God is presented as a lawgiver who has created us, and the world we live in, for a purpose. That purpose is not completely understood, but much has been revealed through the prophets, the Holy Scriptures, and the church. These sources teach that, to guide us in righteous living, God has promulgated rules that we are to obey. He does not compel us to obey them. We were created as free agents, so we may choose to accept or to reject his commandments. But if we are to live as we *should* live, we must follow God's laws. This, it is said, is the essence of morality.

This line of thought has been elaborated by some theologians into a theory about the nature of right and wrong, known as the *Divine Command Theory*. Essentially, this theory says that "morally right" means "commanded by God," and "morally wrong" means "forbidden by God."

From a theoretical point of view, this conception has a number of pleasing features. It immediately solves the old problem about the subjectivity/objectivity of ethics. According to this theory, ethics is not merely a matter of personal feelings or social custom. Whether something is right or wrong is a perfectly objective matter: it is right if God commands it, wrong if God forbids it. Moreover, the Divine Command Theory suggests an answer to the perennial question of why anyone should bother with morality. Why not just look out for one's own interests? If immorality is the violation of God's commandments, there is an easy answer: on the day of final reckoning, you will be held accountable.

There are, however, serious problems for the theory. Of course, atheists would not accept it, because they do not believe that God exists. But the problems that arise are not merely problems for atheists. There are difficulties even for believers. The main problem was first noted by Plato, the Greek philosopher who lived 400 years before the birth of Jesus.

Plato's writings were in the form of dialogues, usually between Socrates and one or more interlocutors. In one of these dialogues, the *Euthyphro*, there is a discussion concerning whether "right" can be defined as "that which the gods command." Socrates is skeptical and asks: *Is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right?* It is one of the most famous questions in the history of philosophy. The contemporary British philosopher Antony Flew suggests that "one good test of a person's aptitude for philosophy is to discover whether he can grasp its force and point."

The point is this. If we accept the theological conception of right and wrong, we are caught in a dilemma. Socrates's question asks us to clarify what we mean. There are two things we might mean, and both options lead to trouble.

1. First, we might mean that conduct is right *because God commands it*. For example, according to Exodus 20:16, God

commands us to be truthful. On this option, the *reason* we should be truthful is simply that God requires it. Apart from the divine command, truth telling is neither good nor bad. It is God's command that *makes* truthfulness right.

But this leads to trouble, for it represents God's commands as arbitrary. It means that God could have given *different* commands just as easily. He could have commanded us to be liars, and then lying, and not truthfulness, would be right. (You may be tempted to reply: "But God would never command us to be liars!" But why not? If he did endorse lying, God would not be commanding us to do wrong, because his command would make lying right.) Remember that on this view, honesty was not right *before* God commanded it. Therefore, he could have had no more reason to command it than its opposite; and so, from a moral point of view, his command is perfectly arbitrary.

Moreover, on this view, the doctrine of the goodness of God is reduced to nonsense. It is important to religious believers that God is not only all-powerful and all-knowing, but that he is also *good*; yet if we accept the idea that good and bad are defined by reference to God's will, this notion is deprived of any meaning. What could it mean to say that God's commands are good? If "X is good" simply means "X is commanded by God," then "God's commands are good" would mean only "God's commands are commanded by God"—an empty truism. In his *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) Leibniz put the point very clearly:

So in saying that things are not good by any rule of goodness, but sheerly by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing it, all the love of God and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the contrary?

Thus if we choose the first of Socrates's two options, we are stuck with consequences that even the most religious people must find unacceptable.

2. There is a way to avoid these troublesome consequences. We can take the second of Socrates's options. We

need not say that right conduct is right because God commands it. Instead, we may say that God commands right conduct *because it is right*. God, who is infinitely wise, realizes that truthfulness is far better than deceitfulness, and so he commands us to be truthful; he sees that killing is wrong, and so he commands us not to kill; and so on for all the commandments.

If we take this option, we avoid the troublesome consequences that plagued the first alternative. God's commands turn out to be not at all arbitrary; they are the result of his wisdom in knowing what is best. And the doctrine of the goodness of God is preserved: to say that his commands are good means that he commands only what, in perfect wisdom, he sees to be the best. But this option leads to a different problem, which is equally troublesome for the theological conception of right and wrong: indeed, in taking this option, we have virtually *abandoned* the theological conception of right and wrong.

If we say that God commands us to be truthful because truthfulness is right, then we are admitting that there is some standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will. We are saying that God *sees* or *recognizes* that truthfulness is right: this is very different from his *making* it right. The rightness exists prior to and independent of God's command, and it is the reason for the command. Thus if we want to know why we should be truthful, the reply "Because God commands it" will not take us very far. We may still ask "But why does God command it?" and the answer to *that* question will provide the underlying reasons why truthfulness is a good thing.

All this may be summarized in the following argument:

- (1) Suppose God commands us to do what is right. Then *either* (a) the right actions are right because he commands them *or* (b) he commands them because they are right.
- (2) If we take option (a), then God's commands are, from a moral point of view, arbitrary; moreover, the doctrine of the goodness of God is rendered meaningless.



- (3) If we take option (b), then we have admitted there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will.
- (4) Therefore, we must *either* regard God's commands as arbitrary, and give up the doctrine of the goodness of God, *or* admit that there is a standard of right and wrong that is independent of his will, and give up the theological definitions of right and wrong.
- (5) From a religious point of view, it is undesirable to regard God's commands as arbitrary or to give up the doctrine of the goodness of God.
- (6) Therefore, even from a religious point of view, a standard of right and wrong that is independent of God's will must be accepted.

Many religious people believe that they should accept a theological conception of right and wrong because it would be impious not to do so. They feel, somehow, that if they believe in God, they *should* think that right and wrong are to be defined ultimately in terms of his will. But this argument suggests otherwise: it suggests that, on the contrary, the Divine Command Theory of right and wrong itself leads to impious results, so that a pious person should *not* accept it. And in fact, some of the greatest theologians, such as St. Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274), rejected the theory for just this reason.

### 4.3. The Theory of Natural Law

The argument presented above suggests that right and wrong cannot be defined in terms of God's will. Although this may seem to be an antireligious conclusion, many of the great theologians of the church agree with it. In the history of Christian thought, the dominant theory of ethics is not the Divine Command Theory. The dominant theory is the *Theory of Natural Law*. This theory has three main parts.

1. The theory rests upon a certain view of what the world is like. The natural world is not regarded merely as a realm of facts, devoid of value and purpose. Instead, the world is conceived to be a rational order with values and purposes built into its very nature.

This way of thinking about the world derives from the Greeks. Aristotle, perhaps the greatest of the ancient philosophers, believed that everything that exists serves some purpose, and that we can never fully understand a thing until we understand what it is *for*. Consider the parts of biological organisms: eyes are for seeing, wings are for flying, legs are for walking, and so on. But in Aristotle's view the point applies equally well to inanimate nature. One of his favorite examples is the question of why it rains. The fact that the rain helps plants to grow is not, he says, a mere coincidence. The rain falls *in order* to provide the water that plants need. It is part of the rational plan of nature.

The Christian thinkers of the Middle Ages found Aristotle's world-view to be perfectly congenial. If nature manifests value and purpose, this could be seen easily enough as God's value and purpose. After all, God was said to have designed the world and everything in it. Therefore, the rational plan of nature was simply the order that God established when the world was created.

2. A corollary of this way of thinking is that "the laws of nature" not only describe how things *are*, they specify *how things ought to be* as well. Things are as they ought to be when they are serving their natural purposes. When they do not, or cannot, serve those purposes, things have gone wrong. Eyes that cannot see are defective, and drought is a natural evil—the badness of both is explained by reference to natural law. But there are also implications for human action. Moral rules are now viewed as deriving from the laws of nature. Some ways of behaving are said to be "natural" and some are "unnatural"; and "unnatural" acts are said to be morally wrong.

Consider, for example, the duty of beneficence. We are morally required to be concerned for our neighbor's welfare as well as for our own. Why? A natural law theorist would say that beneficence is natural for us, considering the kind of creatures we are. We are by our very nature social creatures who want and need the company of other people, and it is part of our natural makeup that we care about others. Someone who does not care at all for others—who *really* does not care, through and through—is seen as deranged, in the terms of modern psychology, as a sociopath. His personality is defec-



tive, just as eyes are defective if they cannot see. And, it might be added, this is true because we were created by God, with a specific "human" nature, as part of his overall plan for the world.

The endorsement of beneficence is relatively uncontroversial. Natural law theory has also been used, however, to support other moral conclusions that are much more contentious. Religious thinkers have traditionally opposed "deviant" sexual practices, and the theoretical justification of their opposition has come more often than not from natural law theory. If everything has a natural purpose, what is the purpose of sex? The obvious answer seems to be procreation. Sexual activity that is not connected with making babies can therefore be viewed as "unnatural," and so such practices as masturbation, oral sex, and sex while using contraceptives—not to mention gay sex—can be condemned for this reason. This way of thinking about sex dates back at least to St. Augustine in the fourth century, and it is explicit in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. (For a brief critical discussion of this argument about sex, see section 3.6 in this book.) The moral theology of the Catholic Church is based on natural law theory. This line of thought lies behind its whole sexual ethic.

Outside the Catholic Church, the Theory of Natural Law has few advocates today. It is generally rejected for two reasons. First, it seems to involve a confusion of "is" and "ought." In the eighteenth century David Hume pointed out that what *is* the case and what *ought to be* the case are logically different notions, and no conclusion about one follows from the other. We can say, for example, that people *are* naturally disposed to be beneficent, but it does not follow from this that they *should be* beneficent. Similarly, it may be that sex *does* produce babies, but it does not follow that sex *ought* or *ought not* to be engaged in only for that purpose. Facts are one thing; values are another. The Theory of Natural Law seems to conflate them.

Second, the Theory of Natural Law has gone out of fashion—although that does not, of course, prove it is false—because the view of the world on which it rests is out of keeping with modern science. Scientists from Galileo to Darwin have produced explanations of natural phenomena that make no reference to values or purposes. The rain falls, according to

modern meteorology, only because of the impersonal operation of physical laws. If this benefits the plants, it is only because they have evolved by the laws of natural selection in a rainy climate. The rain does not fall *in order* to make anything happen; what happens just happens, fortuitously, in consequence of the laws of cause and effect. This is no less true of birds' wings and people's brains. All organisms, including people, have their particular characteristics not because it is the way they "ought" to be but because they are all products of natural selection.

Thus modern science gives us a picture of the world as a realm of facts, where the only "natural laws" are the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, working blindly and without purpose. Whatever values may be, they are not part of the natural order. To the extent that one accepts the world-view of modern science, then, one will be skeptical of the Theory of Natural Law. It is no accident that the theory was a product, not of modern thought, but of the Middle Ages.

3. The third part of the theory may be regarded as somewhat independent of the first two. How, according to this theory, are we to go about determining what is right and what is wrong? The Divine Command Theory says that, in order to determine what is right, we must consult God's commandments. The Theory of Natural Law gives a very different answer. According to this theory, moral judgments are "dictates of reason." The "natural laws" that specify what we should do are laws of reason, which we are able to grasp because God has made us rational beings. The best thing to do in any circumstance, therefore, is whatever course of conduct has the best reasons on its side.

This means that the religious believer has no special access to moral truth. The believer and the nonbeliever are in exactly the same position. God has made all people rational, not just believers; and so for believer and nonbeliever alike, making a responsible moral judgment is a matter of listening to reason and following its directives. They function as moral agents in the same way, even though the nonbelievers' lack of faith prevents them from realizing that God is the author of the rational order in which they participate and which their moral judgments express.

The most influential of the natural-law theorists was, once again, St. Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas, whose thought is regarded as authoritative within the Catholic tradition, said that the moral life is the life lived "according to reason." In his great work the *Summa Theologica*, he wrote:

Its moral nature is stamped on a human act by its object taken with reference to the principles of moral activity, that is according to the pattern of life as it should be lived according to the reason. If the object as such implies what is in accord with the reasonable order of conduct, then it will be a good kind of action; for instance, to assist somebody in need. If, on the other hand, it implies what is repugnant to reason, then it will be a bad kind of action; for instance, to appropriate to oneself what belongs to another. But it may happen that the object does not immediately involve the reasonable plan of life one way or the other, and then it is an action morally indifferent of its kind; for instance, to go for a walk or to pick up a straw.

Acting reasonably, he emphasizes, is not to be contrasted with acting as a Christian, for they are the same thing:

To disparage the dictate of reason is equivalent to condemning the command of God.

This means that, where morality is concerned, the duty of a Christian is no different from the duty of anyone else: it is to think through as carefully as possible the reasons for and against various courses of conduct, and to conform one's conduct to the plan that seems most reasonable. Again, Aquinas says:

Conscience is the dictate of reason. . . . Every judgment of conscience, be it right or wrong, be it about things evil in themselves or morally indifferent, is obligatory, in such wise that he who acts against his conscience always sins.

Thus the Theory of Natural Law—or at least, this part of the theory—leaves morality with about the same relation to religion that science has to religion. Science is autonomous. It has its own questions, its own methods of answering them, and its own standards of truth. Yet even though science is au-

onomous, religious people can still understand its findings in their own way. They can regard science as providing information about how God chose to arrange things: if the earth is not at the center of the universe, then God created a nongeocentric universe; if humankind is the product of a long evolutionary process, then God has created us by initiating that process. Science is independent in the sense that religious belief does not enter into the practice of science and the results of scientific investigation are religiously "neutral." The religious interpretation of those results is an after-the-fact addition—of vital interest to believers, but something that can be ignored by nonbelievers.

The Theory of Natural Law suggests that morality can be understood in the same way. Morality is autonomous. It has its own questions, its own methods of answering them, and its own standards of truth. To the moral agent intent on discovering what she should do, religious considerations are not to the point. What she wants to know is: What are the reasons for and against the various options? What do reason and conscience require of me? Believers and nonbelievers may approach these questions in the same way, and if both are conscientious and rational, they may arrive at the same answers. However, they will part company when they begin to theorize about the *nature* of what they have been doing. The believer may regard the results of this inquiry as revealing God's will—the voice of conscience, she will say, is the voice of God, and it is too bad that the nonbeliever does not realize this.

This approach leaves morality independent, in the sense that religious belief does not affect the calculation of what is best and the results of moral inquiry are religiously "neutral." The religious interpretation of conscience as the voice of God is an after-the-fact addition—of vital interest to believers, but something that can be ignored by nonbelievers. In this way, even though they disagree about religion, believers and nonbelievers nevertheless inhabit the same moral universe.

#### **4.4. Christianity and the Problem of Abortion**

Some religious people may find the preceding discussion unsatisfying. It may seem at best puzzling and at worst far too ab-